

How To Be Righteous

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[0 : 00] Well, it's school holidays at the moment. Some of you will know and are enjoying it. We were actually at the movies yesterday. And so, as usual, we get some action-packed thrillers in the cinemas.

Dinosaurs are back as the flavor of the month in Jurassic World. But so is Arnie. Yes, the new Terminator movie was just released on Wednesday.

Now, I was going to actually show you the trailer on it, but I decided it was actually too violent. And some of us might not be able to take it. It's not healthy for us. But you can probably imagine what it's like.

Action-packed, fast and furious, lots of computer-generated thrills and spills. And most of us have grown up with these movies, haven't we? Action-packed movies.

It's exciting. It's what sells tickets. And in these movies, the hero goes from one excitement to another, one adventure after another, right? From high to high.

[1 : 02] And so, I guess it's a little wonder that we sometimes feel that our lives, in order to be successful, need to be like that. Parents will know during school holidays that they need to find activities to keep their children entertained.

Daddy, I'm bored is a very common refrain. Incidentally, I'm not talking about my girls, thankfully. But we hear it a lot. And somehow, as well, we seem to think then, that's how our life of faith has to be like as well.

If God's real, we think, then we need to see Him in action in our lives all the time. When we pray, He needs to answer. If not a miracle, then at least a clear sign from Him.

When we tell someone about Jesus, we need to see them respond at once. This is sort of our vision, or maybe it's just a popular thing, but this is a vision of what it means to have a victorious Christian life.

Where we're high-fiving God each time, you know, each day, metaphorically speaking, pumping our fists in triumph, spiritual triumph. Except that's not our lives, is it?

[2 : 14] That may be other people's lives. Maybe the ones we read on the internet. But ours is a little bit more ho-hum, isn't it? Our problems linger. We have obstacles that we sort of find hard to overcome.

It's not totally boring, our life. But neither is it spectacular. And so, I guess we wonder sometimes, is God really working in our lives? Well, last week, we saw Abraham, didn't we?

In action-packed mode. God had given him a famous victory. And afterwards, he stood up to be counted as God's person. But then, after all that, well, what did Abraham really have to show for all that?

God had made him all these promises, but he was still childless. And now he's even got enemies to boot. Superpowers in the north, the king of Sodom, maybe even the king of Egypt.

And so, as we enter chapter 15, things have fallen into a bit of low for Abraham. A low, even. And we've all been there, haven't we? After having the high, let's say, of being baptized, then days and weeks after that, can be a bit of a letdown.

[3 : 30] It's a bit the same if you return from a successful mission trip, or a fantastic summit camp. We expect things to go from strength to strength.

And yet, nothing much seems to be happening. Well, as for Abraham, the one big thing he had hoped for, descendants to inherit the land, well, that promise was going nowhere fast.

Yeah? God comes to Abraham again, therefore, in the midst of that lull, verse 1, and says, well, it reads, And so, even though Abraham was living by faith, he was afraid after all.

That's why God had to say to him, do not be afraid. Or, at the very least, he was tempted to fear. But God assures him that he will protect him against his enemies, saying, I will be your shield. And then, to show that he has not forgotten his promises, God adds, your very great reward. Nevertheless, Abraham had questions on his mind.

[4 : 41] You might even call them doubts. You see, he couldn't quite see how God would fulfill his promises. So, he questions the Lord. It's a bold act, really.

But, he's being honest. He's being honest about where he is. Now, God doesn't rebuke him. He could live with Abraham's honesty. For, you see, faith is not the absence of doubt, but trust, in spite of doubt.

What was crucial for Abraham was his attitude of submission. See, he still called God the sovereign Lord. Didn't he? He still trusted that God was sovereign.

But Abraham had two questions for God. And the first, it's in verses 2 to 4, it's about his offsprings. And then the second, in verse 8, it's about the land. And so, to the first, in verse 2, he asks, what can you give me?

This great, rewarding promise you've been making, telling me about, what can you give me? Since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliza, or Eliza, of Damascus.

[5 : 50] Eliza, we discover in verse 3, is just a servant. Although I think he's probably the head servant in the household. As for the second, Abraham asks of the land, in verse 8, sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?

You see, both questions actually show his struggle. His struggle to see how the promises will be fulfilled. Sarai is not getting any younger, and neither was he. And so, while God is not angry with Abraham for his questions, we see that in the manner that he answers Abraham, we also find that his answers aren't quite what Abraham wanted to hear.

For what God does is simply to reassure Abraham of his promises. He may give a little bit more detail, he may give a small sign of confirmation, but that's pretty much it.

At the end of the day, God's response essentially says to Abraham, wait. Wait, even though you've already waited. So, on the question of offspring, the Lord takes him outside one evening on a clear sky, and the Lord said, verse 5, this man will not be your heir, Eliza, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

And then the Lord gives him a sign. He says, look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them, so shall your offspring be. So, his offspring will come from his own body. In some sense, that's a new thing.

[7 : 16] But, in another way, that's what to be expected, right? I mean, that's what we've expected all along. Because otherwise, why would the blessing be so special anyway?

It had to come from his body. As for the question of the land, the Lord then gives a little more detail. But first, Abraham had to go through this, prepare this strange sacrifice in verse 9.

He had to bring to the Lord a heifer, which is a young cow, a goat, and a ram, each three years old. And along with that, a dove and a young pigeon. And then he's to cut them in two and arrange the halves on opposite sides to each other, except for the birds, which are too small to half.

So, they just go on either side. But then after that, Abraham had to wait. He's waiting again. And fend off the birds of prey while he did. Now, we're not sure how long he had to wait, but probably enough time to make him tired and to fall into a deep sleep as the sun sets.

And then the Lord finally comes in a thick and dreadful darkness. And the answer God gives to Abraham, just like the question before, amounts to more waiting.

[8 : 25] Doesn't it? Listen to what God says. Know for certain that for 400 years, your descendants will be strangers in the country, not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated there.

Did you get that? 400 years. Four generations. So, not only was God asking Abraham to wait, he was asking his son to wait and his grandson and his great-grandson.

Only then will his descendants enter the land, by which time Abraham would be, you know, long gone. But not only that, this waiting will be done in hardship, for they will be enslaved and mistreated in a country not their own.

And we know that that's going to be Egypt. So, tell me, does this all sound like a promise of blessing to you? The only consolations that God gives are these.

One, he will die in peace at a good old age. Two, that those who mistreat his descendants will be punished. Three, that his descendants will then leave with great possessions, just like he did when

he left Egypt.

[9 : 32] And then four, that this waiting is not punishment on his descendants. Rather, it is so that the sin of the Amorites could reach its full measure.

That is, so that when God actually dispossesses them from the land, it would actually be justly deserved by them. It was going to be an act of justice by God.

So, friends, this is God's promise to Abraham. This is the one that God chose through whom to bless the entire earth.

And yet, we find that his walk with God, his life, is to be characterized by lows as well as highs, more lows rather than highs, doubt in spite of faith, not knowing the full details of God's plan, and waiting, lots of waiting, waiting even as he dies.

So, we mustn't be surprised then if our life of faith is similar, shall we? Not quite the action-packed movie that we'd like.

[10 : 42] But this, my friends, is exactly what the victorious Christian life looks like. God hasn't forgotten Abraham. Rather, he's working to train him in faith so that he will relate rightly with him.

which Abraham does just, and Abraham does just that. And how do we know? Because the key verse in this entire story passage is exactly on that point.

Verse 6, Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. So, in the midst of the lows, the doubts, and the waiting, Abraham believed the Lord.

that was the key thing, and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness. At the end of the day, that's all that mattered. Abraham believed and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.

But let's think a bit more on this. What does it mean to be credited with righteousness? Often, we might think of a checklist in mind, a list of do's and don'ts, and if we get more credits than debits, more rights than wrongs, then we've passed and we're counted as righteous.

[11 : 58] But in the Bible, the idea of righteousness is actually a relational one. To be righteous is to be rightly related to God and have a right standing before him.

Now, the two ideas are related, of course, right? Because when we break God's law, it undermines and breaks this right relationship with him. We've rejected the laws that reflect his will.

It's just like when as a father I lay down some rules for my children, say about how much time they can play on their iPads. Because I know they can't spend too long on them, right? They have to do their homework and all that kind of stuff.

Now, if they break those rules, then they are unrighteous, not rightly related to me. Not just because they've broken my rules, but because they've rejected my authority. But let's say they do keep all those rules, right?

They stop playing the iPad when I said so. And yet, because they resent the time limit that's put on them, they don't speak to me, but they sulk. They go and slam the bedroom door and sulk in their bedroom.

[13 : 00] Well, in that case, they may have kept the rules, haven't they? But they're not righteous either, because they're not relating rightly with me. And so it is with Abraham.

Abraham's right relationship with God isn't just a result of him keeping the law, but because of faith. Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

It is his belief, his trust, that's what makes him right before God. Turn with me to the other reading in Romans, chapter 4, 1-1-2-9.

Keep your thumb or finger back in Genesis, we'll turn back to that. And we'll see exactly how the Apostle Paul expands on this very verse, this verse 6. And he says that it's not moral perfection that makes Abraham or us right before God.

And to support that, he quotes from the Psalms, so verse 8, he says, Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not count against him.

[14 : 05] This was true with Abraham. He made mistakes, didn't he, going down to Egypt and next week we'll see he'll make some more. Yet God counted him righteous before him, not because he kept all the rules, but because he trusted God.

Paul then adds that the righteousness is not by circumcision, so verse 9. This was something that the Jews did. They thought that because they did this, it set them apart as a special people, a sign that they were God's favorite.

But Paul says that Abraham was counted righteous not after circumcision, but before. So the circumcision was a sign given after as a seal, verse 11, of righteousness.

It wasn't a precondition, but a confirmation. He was already righteous before circumcision, so he didn't do this magic thing and then become righteous. And then lastly, Paul says that Abraham's righteousness wasn't through the law, verse 13, because again, the law came after.

But more than that, Paul says that if you can be made righteous by the law, then faith is useless and God's promise is worthless. Verse 14.

[15:17] That is, if you could work to be right with God, then you aren't trusting in God but yourself. So, Paul says, and we find that in Genesis, that it's faith that produces a righteous life, a right relationship with God.

But how does God achieve this faith in us? What is it, in other words, that he's trying to get us to put our faith in, to believe in? Well, let's look a bit more, come back to Genesis and we'll go over some of the verses again.

But this is what a righteous life does. Firstly, a righteous life trusts that God's word is enough. Abraham believed that God's word is enough.

The more you trust someone, the more you would take their word on things. That's right, isn't it? So, if you trust your doctor, you wouldn't ask for a second opinion, right?

You may, but you tend not to. When you need your car serviced, you try and find a mechanic you can trust. So, you can take his word for what needs fixing rather than, again, you know, second guessing or trying to find somebody else to make sure he's not cheating you.

[16:37] Well, all through this series, God's been teaching Abraham to do just that, trust that his word is enough. Every time Abraham needs assurance, God reaffirms his words and invites him to trust in that.

Sometimes he gives a little more detail, sometimes there may be a sign, but he refrains from giving him every detail or sweetening his promises with more promises.

Like, you know, when they sell those steak knives on TV, there's no, but wait, there's more, is there? No, God just repeats and reaffirms his promise because God wants Abraham to know that I am the creator of the heaven and earth, I am the one who created the stars in the skies and the dust on the earth and therefore, if you can see these things being created, you can trust that I will also create offspring from your body.

So, remember a few weeks back how I said it's not how much faith you have, but who you have faith in. Remember that? Well, what's also true is that it's the object of your faith that determines the amount of your faith.

you can't grow in faith unless your view of God grows as well. Does that make sense? That is, the bigger your view of God, then the more confidence you'll place on his word.

[18:04] And the less you'll need other things like signs or whatever fleeces like Gideon to support or embellish it. God's word would be enough.

Alright, now the second thing God wants us to trust then is to trust that his work is enough. So, now come back to this strange ritual in the chapter to see that. Because after Abraham cuts the animals in half and darkness fell, what happens in verses 17 and 18 is this.

Look down there with me. A smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. Now, nowadays, when you want to do a deal, you sign a contract and you shake hands on it.

You buy a property, that's what happens. Or, if you're a gang member and you want to take a blood oath, then you, have you seen those in the movies? You cut yourself and then you shake hands and mingle your blood to seal the bond.

Well, what we see here is the ancient way of entering into a contract. Parties to a contract or covenant would walk between the animals as a way of saying, if I break my part of the agreement, then may I become like these severed animals.

[19:20] That's essentially what they're doing. It's like pronouncing a curse on yourself if you break the covenant. And that's a solemn oath that they were entering into. And what we read here is exactly what's happening, except, notice the difference, only God walks between the animals.

His presence is the firepot and the torch, but God doesn't make Abraham do the same. Why is that? Because in this covenant, God does all the work.

Now, nothing compels God to act in this way. I mean, after all, who's Abraham that he needed to do this? And yet he does it freely so that Abraham knows that God's committed to his work and he's willing to put his reputation on the line, his word on the line, so that Abraham can trust him totally. And friends, God has actually made a similar covenant with us. On that day, darkness fell too and the sun set. Except this time, God didn't walk between dead animals.

Rather, he sent his son to hang from a cross. But that too is all God's work, because he didn't make us hang with him on the cross. All he asked for us is to trust that his work, the work on the cross, is enough.

[20 : 40] That there's no need for us to add our own work to it, but simply to trust in his son for salvation. If we try to add to it, then whether it's good deeds or our religious party, then what we're saying is, whether we realize it or not, is that God's work is not enough.

That we have to add to it. That Christ, what he did on the cross, wasn't enough. That we have to do something to add to it. But Paul says in Romans, that same passage, that in that case, it's no longer a gift from God.

It's an obligation. It's no longer faith, but works. So a righteous life, trust that God's work is enough. And finally, the third thing God teaches Abraham and us, is to trust that God is enough.

I suppose this third point is simply the combination of the first two. But come back with me to the start of this chapter to see that in verse 1. Notice what God didn't say.

He didn't say to Abraham, do not fear Abraham, I will give you a shield and I will give you a great reward. No, God gave himself. He said, I am your shield, I am your great reward.

[21 : 54] Everything else, the land, the offspring, they are just expressions of his grace and his love. What Abraham has there and then is much better than the land and the offspring.

He has God himself. God is not in the future tense. He doesn't need to wait. I am your great reward now. I am your shield now.

And so our right relationship with God, our righteousness is not actually a means to an end. It is an end. It is the end. We don't use our relationship with God to get something else.

When we have God, that's all we need. God wants us to do is to trust in that finished work of Christ. God wants us to trust that he is enough, that he is all we need. Tim Keller, you know I read a lot of Tim Keller, but Tim Keller said that a man came to him once when he was about to lose his career and family, and I think that was during the GFC, and said, God is not making us wait to be cruel.

[23 : 45] He's not withholding things from us because he lacks compassion. No, when these things happen to us, it is so that we know that God is all we need. He's actually giving us what is best.

God is enough, and that's the best we can ever have in life. Abraham believed in that, and so should we, and it will be credited to us as righteousness.

So let me pray for us, so that God will help us to keep doing that. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, we sometimes struggle and seem to think that you do not care for us or you do not love us, particularly when things don't go well, or maybe we do, and yet we feel like life is second best.

Father, we know that trials are not easy for us sometimes. Waiting is not easy for us. God help us even in those times, and whether it's good times or bad times, to realize that you are enough, that your son is enough, that to be in right relationship with you is the end, not the means to an enemy.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.